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# **Vocationalisation of Secondary Education in Zimbabwe: An Examination of Current Policies, Options and Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the apparent conflict between persistent attempts to vocationalise school curricula in relation to the controversy surrounding the provision of school-based vocational education in developing countries. It is argued in the paper that given the socio-economic and political context of Zimbabwe as a post-colonial state, the provision of technical/ vocational education should emerge as one of the key educational reforms as we approach the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The historical, social-economic and political factors influencing post-independence curricula reforms in Zimbabwe provide the conceptual framework of my discussion.*

## **Introduction**

The development of technical and vocational education remains one of the major challenges confronting post-independence reform policies in Zimbabwe. The political will to provide an education that is relevant to school leavers and that boost economic development is evident in the various policy pronouncements. The introduction of the Education With production (EWP) philosophy soon after independence and the subsequent launching of the New Structure and Content of Education through the 1986 Education Act testify to the importance that the Zimbabwean Government attaches to technical and vocational education.

## **Context**

The education system in Zimbabwe cannot be analysed without taking into account the colonial legacies that seem to continue to prevail. The endemic school-leaver employment problem which was exacerbated by the negative effects of the IMF-prescribed Economic Structural Adjustment Programme cannot be attributed to schooling alone but the

economic system which has not been sufficiently democratized. The so-called formal sector continues to involve and benefit a minority of the population in spite of persistent calls for economic empowerment of the majority. It is the contention of this paper that the outcomes of school-based vocational education are influenced by the prevailing socio-economic and political factors.

Attempts to vocationalise school curricula have permeated education policies in both the colonial period and independent Zimbabwe. Industrial education during the colonial period was intended to prepare most of the few Africans in formal education as semi-skilled workers under 'white' supervision. This was evident in curricula which emphasized basic craft skills and the apparent lack of post-school opportunities to train in highly skilled areas. After the attainment of political independence in 1980, the provision of technical and vocational education became one of the key policy issues in the new educational reforms. The new government regarded education as a mechanism to transform the inherited political and socio-economic infrastructures and create a more egalitarian society. This is reflected in the phenomenal expansion of the education system and post-school opportunities to train in skilled areas.

Perceived along socialist lines based on Marxist/ Leninist doctrine, the marrying of 'theory and practice' became the new emphasis in educational reforms. Such education was intended to empower the majority of pupils and enhance their employment opportunities. While official policy continues to advocate vocationalisation of school curricula, international literature and aid and development agencies have increasingly questioned the efficacy of such policies. Educational economists in particular remain adamant that it is impetuous to follow such policies. The World Bank for instance has shifted from its support for vocational education, arguing that this type of education is too expensive, does not yield the expected returns and is therefore not cost-effective. The Bank has shifted its interest from the funding of vocational education to basic education, as enunciated in its policy paper in which it categorically states:

Bank lending should strengthen the quality of, and access to, academic secondary education, rather than prevocational

courses. ...for secondary education, given a poor record of performance, the diversification of curricula by adding vocational courses should be avoided. (World Bank, 1991, p.68).

These views have since been reiterated widely. In spite of the increasing literature denouncing such policies, attempts to vocationalise school curricula particularly at secondary level, have remained persistent in Zimbabwe as in most other developing countries. Governments continue to emphasize the provision of technical and vocational education as a response to escalating youth unemployment that is exacerbated by their declining economies and the increasing domination of world markets by the industrialized countries. While they may agree that vocational education is expensive in comparison to other areas of school curricula, they also regard it as an investment in human capital for boosting economic development and reducing unemployment. These views have been contested by critics who argue that the relationship between education generally and economic development is dubious.

Although governments in most developing countries continue to vocationalise their school curricula, funding for such programmes has been seriously reduced or completely curtailed by donor agencies. This has aggravated the situation of vocational education programmes. Lack of funds now seems to obscure any possible success of these programmes, thereby confirming the views that vocationalizing school curricula is not viable. Assessing the intrinsic worth of specific programme is now even more problematic since lack of financial support has become a major constraint.

It is contended in the current paper that while it is necessary to take into account the financial implications of providing educational programmes, the cost is not a sufficient criterion for deciding whether or not to pursue particular policies. Most studies denouncing vocationalisation policies seem to take as their main consideration, the costs involved in providing vocational education in relation to the observed labour market outcomes for pupils graduating from these programmes. However, the current paper takes the view that the long

term effects to individual earnings or economic development cannot be ascertained by simply assessing the immediate labour market outcomes of specific programmes. Studies based on the labour market outcomes of vocational education fail to acknowledge that recruitment practices, labour market segmentation and other political and socioeconomic factors influence and explain why school leavers fail to get jobs. In this regard, it is necessary to combine both theoretical and empirical approaches to investigate vocationalisation of school curricula.

## **Theoretical framework**

Arguments arising from the 'vocationalisation debate' are largely based on different sets of assumptions. For instance, educational economists tend to regard the main purpose of education as that of meeting the requirements of the economy. They tend to be mainly concerned with 'profitability' and 'rates of return'. Their analyses are therefore based on models derived from the 'human capital theory'. Sociologists, on the other hand, regard the economy as there to satisfy human needs and not as an end in itself. They postulate for instance that education in capitalist systems reproduces stratified social structures to suit the social relations in the production sector. Consequently, findings emanating from such studies are irreconcilable. While human capital theorists have tended to ignore the social aspects and political economy of educational provision, educational reproduction theorists have not paid due regard to economic considerations in schooling.

## **Conceptions of vocational education**

From an international perspective, the provision of vocational education in school curricula has been a contentious issue since introduction of formal systems of education. The problem can be traced from early Greek philosophers whose conceptions of 'valid knowledge' separated 'mental' from 'manual' activities. Terms such as 'practice vs theory', 'training vs education', 'hand vs head', 'skills vs knowledge', 'applied vs pure', 'knowing how vs know that', have remained in common use in educational discourse, reflecting the unwarranted academic/ vocational dichotomy. Although the divide has been contested by many influential scholars over the generations, it is still widely supported and continues to influence educational provision in

many countries up to this day. The academic/ vocational dichotomy is based on the traditional division of labour in formal sectors of capitalist economic systems.

In Zimbabwe, the imperatives to provide an education that responds to the needs of industry and indeed the economic sector as whole are overwhelming. It is necessary, however, to regard the purpose of school-based technical and vocational education beyond that of meeting the immediate requirements of employers in the formal productive sector of the economy. In the United States of America, as early as 1920, John Dewey suggested broader conceptions of vocational education. Dewey (2009) criticized the provision of such education for purposes limited to the immediate requirements of industry pointing out that:

... there is danger that vocational education would be interpreted in theory and practice as trade education... Education would then become an instrument of perpetuating unchanged the existing industrial order of society; instead of operating as a means of transformation (p. 372).

Critics of this view question whether education that is not oriented to the direct needs of employment is indeed 'vocational' at all. Silberman (cited in Lewis, 2006) hints:

In our effort to improve the ability of vocational education to reinforce academic skills, we must be careful not to take the heart out of vocational programs by removing their work-related components (p. 102).

There seems to be a belief that vocational education can only be either of the two polarities of a continuum, whereby on one end it is almost entirely theoretical while on the other it is specific job training. Such a view does not take into account the variants in between these extremes. Controversy remains, regarding the provision of school-based vocational education and has resulted in what is generally referred to as the 'vocationalisation debate'. Extensive literature has appeared under such themes as 'education and employment', 'diversification', or 'vocationalisation' of school curricula. International literature and aid development agencies have increasingly questioned the efficacy of

policies advocating the provision of school-based technical and vocational education.

## **Discussion**

There is a growing consensus among academics and development and donor agencies that schools in developing countries should concentrate on academic subjects and leave the provision of vocational skills to the workplace. On the other hand, in spite of persistent vocationalisation policy pronouncements, curricula in post-colonial states like Zimbabwe have remained largely academic, catering for the needs of the minute proportion of pupils who proceed to higher and further education. The inherited economic system promotes elitist education in which theoretical knowledge is regarded as distinct and superior to practical activities. A paradoxical situation exists in which there are acute shortages of personnel in skilled areas while school leavers and general unemployment continue to escalate. Increasing empirical evidence emerging from international literature has shown the labour market outcomes of vocational education to be poor. It is concluded from such evidence that since vocational education is substantially more expensive than academic, policies in developing countries should emphasize more academic education (World Bank, 1991 & 1992). Viewed from the functionalist perspective in which economic requirement determine educational provision, and regarding the inherited colonial economic systems as given, the 'vocational fallacy' becomes a truism. It becomes unnecessary to provide skills beyond the immediate requirements of industry. The main concern, then, is not what school leavers need for economic survival but what school leavers are needed by the economic system. This results in elitist education which leads to the promotion of a few individuals while excluding the majority of the population from participating in economic activities.

Arguments challenging vocationalisation policies do not seem to take into account the dysfunction in the inherited capitalist economic systems in which disparities and irregularities in recruitment practices continue to reflect colonial legacies. The critics ignore the need to transform and democratize the economic systems and seek new development strategies that cater for the needs of the majority of the population. It is the contention of this paper that an education system



that combines both theoretical and practical activities is necessary in order to change from the colonial 'elitist' to post-independence 'mass-oriented' development strategies. If economic systems in post-colonial states like Zimbabwe are to benefit the majority of the people, it implies therefore that more people should participate in economic activities. From this perspective, vocational education should be provided as a preparation of the majority of school leavers who are not absorbed into formal sector employment. Such education should enable the creation of alternative production systems (APS) which are not limited to the small-scale enterprises often associated with the informal sector. The systems should be viable, compete with and expand the formal industrial sector (Nherera, 1994).

The provision of technical and vocational education as preparation for the informal sector (or APS) should not be limited to basic craft skills. It should also include science-based technological activities for pupils with the aptitude for scientific and mathematical concepts and who have an interest in such activities. This is an education for empowerment and not just for employment. Technical and vocational education should equip pupils with skills that will not only enable them to join industry as skilled personnel, but enable them to create industry. Preliminary findings from one study indicate that self employment is increasing generally and among school leavers facing the harsh realities of economic life exacerbated by the negative effects of the economic meltdown. Given the necessary support in financial, management and training requirement, the alternative productive system holds the future for the majority of school leavers and the Zimbabwean economy. This provides a way of democratizing production and economic activities in which the majority of the population continues to be marginalized. The induction of all pupils in work-related skills through technical, vocational and other practical subjects is therefore crucial as an indigenization strategy.

School curricula for all pupils should therefore include both academic and vocational subjects. Curricula should emphasize problem-solving and versatility rather than the mastery of specific manual/ craft skills aimed at meeting the immediate requirements of employers. Vocational education should be regarded as a way to broaden education and

improve the career opportunities for all pupils. From this view, practical and theoretical activities are complimentary rather than alternative forms of education.

## **Conclusion**

Given the socio-economic and political contexts of Zimbabwe as a post-colonial state, the imperatives to vocationalise school curricula are overwhelming. Contrary to the view of the 'vocational school fallacy' (Foster, 1965), vocational education has a crucial role to play in the protracted transformation of colonial legacies, consolidation of 'independence' and the creation of a more egalitarian society. If Zimbabwe is to fully utilize its abundance of natural resources for the benefit of the majority of the population, it is imperative to focus on human resource development. It has to raise its technological capacity, not only to process its raw materials, but to meet the human resource requirements of a liberalized economy. Zimbabwe can attract technology and foreign investment by developing a large, highly skilled workforce which will make it cheaper for production plants to be located in the country. Evidence from the rapidly industrializing South East Asian countries which include; Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia confirms the potency of human resource development.

Substantial literature in developed countries has debated 'post-modernism' as the way forward in their development strategies. It is argued that we live in a world of crisis which is materializing in post-industrial organisation of production (Clegg, 1998). 'Work' in this context, is regarded as uncertain and temporary, based on rapidly changing technology and undertaken by a fragmented global workforce consisting of highly skilled, mobile and functionally flexible workers and lowly skilled, numerically flexible workers subject to periods of unemployment (Hager, 1995). Given that our economic and productive sectors are dominated by multi-national companies from industrialized countries, we cannot afford to ignore these trends reflected in post-modernist thought. Through technical and vocational education we can develop strategies to counter the negative effects of the globalization of production systems.

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